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Awesome EMP Could End War Before It Starts

A forbidding new destructive force, known in the backrooms of the Pentagon by the stark letters EMP, could end World War III before it started.

EMP stands for "electromagnetic pulse," an awesome force that has precipitated some hushed and worried discussion behind closed doors. It's still no more than a scientific theory mercifully untested.

In language only a scientist would understand, a high-altitude nuclear explosion causes gamma rays to collide with electrons in the air molecules. This sets up a transverse electric current that creates electromagnetic pulses radiating down toward the earth.

But what EMP means to the rest of us is simply this: If nuclear weapons were to be detonated 200 miles above the United States, the electromagnetic pulses from the explosion would almost instantaneously knock out all the electrical power in North America. No television, radio, lighting, hospital equipment, computers, telephones. Total blackout of the entire continent.

All this might be passed off as survivable discomfort. Back to the pioneer days; we'd muddle through.

What worries our strategic thinkers, though, is that EMP might be used to knock out America's top-level, "C-cubed" system—command, control and communications—that is supposed to respond to a nuclear strike with a retaliatory attack.

Some Pentagon analysts have speculated that the Soviet Union might force the United States to surrender simply by exploding nuclear bombs in space and robbing us of our strategic retaliation. Our missiles, after all, depend on electricity to put them in motion.

Before we run up the white flag, however, I should point out that other experts consider a Soviet EMP threat to be a little less awesome than some persons suggest.

They point out, correctly, that the Kremlin would still have to worry about U.S. nuclear-armed submarines, which would be unaffected by any electrical power failure in the continental United States.

Meanwhile, top-secret CIA reports make it clear that the Soviets have been performing EMP tests since at least 1974. So, of course, have our scientists.

No one has the slightest idea who is ahead in the EMP race, but it's obvious that no one wants to take the chance that the other side has gained a commanding lead.

The obvious answer to an EMP attack by the Russians would be to "harden" the C-cubed facilities so that they could withstand the threat. But a top-secret Joint Chiefs of Staff report, obtained by my associate Dale Van Atta, shows that this hasn't been done.

"The ground-based facilities and attendant communications of the National Military Command System probably would be destroyed in the early stages of a nuclear attack, or degraded by EMPs and jamming attacks," the report warns.

In other words, the control center at which a president would push the button to retaliate against an enemy attack might not work.

In fact, the report notes, the president's control center could be so badly disrupted by an EMP attack that its "ability to execute a coordinated strategic nuclear response to attack could become questionable."

The Joint Chiefs are also worried that, without equipment hardened against EMP effects, the ability to inform headquarters of a nuclear attack by Soviet submarine missiles might not come "in sufficient time to respond before missile impact on Washington, D.C."

Defense contractors are now working on electrical systems that will be immune to electromagnetic pulse effects.

The Pentagon just hopes they'll find a solution in time.